



A CRITICAL STUDY OF CLIFFORD ODETS AS A PROMISING PROLETARIAN PLAYWRIGHT IN AMERICAN DRAMA

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Abstract

Clifford Odets was a leading dramatist of the theatre of social protest, an American proletarian playwright, and a typical product of the Depression era in the United States during the 1930s. He was committed to his social obligations from the beginning. His commitment to society was never ignored, as he tried to introduce the maximum number of men and women representing astonishing varieties of social and cultural background into his plays in a sincere attempt to bring to light the different kinds of pressures under which each individual was functioning during the days of social disturbance. His plays like *Waiting for Lefty*, *Awake and Sing!*, and so on deals with the general question of man's ability to survive economically, the economic effects of the depression, questions of artist's adjustment in Hollywood, symbolic of business exploitation at the expense of aesthetic standards, and the biblical theme of the deluge and Noah's Ark. The optimism is present in the last scene of nearly every Odets' play, whatever unpleasantness precedes it, because Odets believed in people and their potentialities. The emotional intensity and narrative urgency are the hallmarks of Odets' plays. All these made Clifford Odets a master and promising proletarian playwright in American Drama.

Key Words - Leading dramatist, depression era, proletarian, narrative urgency, master playwright.

Clifford Odets was a leading dramatist of the theatre of social protest, an American proletarian playwright and a typical product of the Depression era in the United States during the 1930s. He was committed to his social obligations from the beginning. He had witnessed the restlessness of contemporary society where no man could feel that he

belonged. The general frustration caused by economic depression, and the bleak future for the nation looming largely ahead made him conscious of the power and the duty of an artist to serve the common man. Talking about Odets' writing talent, BurnsMantle in his Contemporary American Playwrights states, "The most promising playwriting talent that has

come into the theatre in the last ten years is the possession of a young man named Clifford Odets" (Mantle, Burns, 1938). The corpus of Odets' plays covered quite a wide range of interest though rarely pointed out by critics. Even though his commitment to society was never ignored, he tried to introduce the maximum number of men and women representing astonishing varieties of social and cultural backgrounds into his plays in a sincere attempt to bring to light the different kinds of pressures or nullifying forces under which each individual was functioning during the days of social disturbance. Walter Kerr studied Odets' plays and praised, "I myself might not have gone so far, but on re-reading the plays now, I am convinced that no American playwright since O'Neill has been more greatly gifted than Odets" (Clurman, 1979).

The general criticism leveled against Odets was that the range of his themes was too narrow to offer him varieties that would keep the attention of the audience. During the turbulent 'thirties', he could choose his themes based on themes of labour struggle, class war, economic frustration, families suffocating under financial pressure, and such other ideas. But post-war America underwent such basic changes that most of his earlier themes became irrelevant and outdated. The significance of his plays diminished with relevance to the age. By the fifties, especially after 1954, it was as though Clifford Odets had exhausted the funds of imagination, and had nothing new to offer. His final plays were said to reflect Odets' self-conscious struggle to give a touch of novelty to his drama, and they gave an impression of having been tediously worked on. The public was tempted to point out that Odets had committed errors in his choice of themes, especially when he had taken upon himself the Messianic role during the age of commitment. The zeal for reform, in general, is said to have affected the aesthetic standard of his plays.

Clifford Odets did not make any substantial contribution of an innovatory nature

to the dramatic technique of the age. Through the play, *Waiting for Lefty*, an agit-prop play, which is mainly concerned with the general question of man's ability to survive economically, the form attained respectability and universality, much against the normally attributed topical limitations. Himelstein Morgan, in his article, 'Theory and Performance in the Depression Theatre,' rules out the element of literary value in 'agit-prop' pieces, "At times this desire to make classics even out of 'agit-prop' seems too much like the courtier's desire to praise the emperor's new clothes" (Himelstein Morgan, 1972). He means that the students of literature searching for aesthetic value in such pieces of the time are on the lookout for that which does not exist. Morgan states that the drama of the 1930's did not have any theoretical background to speak of. According to him, the case has been overstated. The elements of social and political protest had merged with the already popular patterns of drama. It was the novelty of appeal that gave the impression of the novelty of a theoretical background. In the words of Douglas, "Theorists sought new bottles for the new wine of Leninist revolution, but often settled for old bottles that they pretended were new with the aid of new labels. Most playwrights, however, went on bottling the old wine of social reform in old bottles withhold labels" (Douglas, 1972). Drama as a weapon was used by the 'agit-prop' promoters. Clifford Odets did not need to take shelter behind the conscious attempt to distort facts and concentrate on Marxist sloganeering. With due concentration on character delineation and psychological situations, maintaining artistic standards of a high order, Odets succeeded not in bringing his art down to the level of a propaganda piece, but in proving that real literature by itself could have the desired appeal when properly delineated.

In his next play, *Awake and Sing!*, Clifford Odets effectively combines both social and personal factors, adding yet another dimension, that of the Jewish element. The title itself

suggests that this is the beginning of the awakening and so it is an exhortation. The playwright was able to present the external causes especially financial insecurity as the main villain in the drama. Through the play *Till the Day I Die*, Odets projects a personal conflict. This was in the form of a letter from Nazi Germany. It is to the human cause in general that Odets is committed in this play. Odets' contribution to the 'Domestic Drama' also was already discussed. The demand for domestic drama in the modern age was met as a challenge by Odets in *Paradise Lost*, *Rocket to the Moon*, and *The Country Girl*. By the time Odets reaches *Golden Boy* and *Paradise Lost*, his increasing interest in the individual asserts mastery in his mind, relegating overt political commitment to the background to have appeal by implication. *Golden Boy* is the playwright's last play to focus on the economic effects of the Depression. *Rocket to the Moon* and *Night Music* reflect this phase of Odets' choice of themes. Themes of love introduced by him in almost all these plays were invariably entangled in the confused questions of economics which had never left Odets' purview. *The Big Knife* and *The Country Girl* deal with questions of artist's adjustment in Hollywood, symbolic of business exploitation at the expense of aesthetic standards. The final play, *The Flowering Peach*, presents the biblical theme of the deluge and Noah's ark. Middle-class problems presented at a rather subdued level were the keynote of domestic drama. In Odets' plays, there is a revival of this genre with the added dimension of social commitment.

Clifford Odets had the spontaneous subjectivity of a poet. Sensitive to the common man's pain, the entire range of his drama reflects this lyrical impulse. Gassner calls him, "the natural lyricist of the common life" (John Gassner, 1954). The average man's sense of frustration, defeat, hope and faith are rendered into moving pieces of art, poetic in spirit though not in expression. Gassner tries to analyse the reasons for the decline of Odets' popularity which certainly was not for want of talent. He

attributes it to "his tendency to join realism and social allegory with an imperfect marriage license" (John Gassner, 1954). He has effectively summed up the practical problem that Odets with his volatile temperament had to combine simple realistic portrayals which will serve as allegorical devices exposing the defects of contemporary society. This union that he attempted led to a strained or laboured effect in his plays, trying to concentrate on two equally important aspects at the same time. Gassner rightly analyses the reason that made both sections of the critics - those who prefer plain realism and those who look for social allegory - feel that Odets' plays fell short of expectations from each of these perspectives.

Harold Clurman, the close associate, who had intimate knowledge of Clifford the man, and Odets the dramatist, explains the nature of his commitment. He has covered almost all the aspects of Odets' thinking. Not committed in the complete sense to a specific political philosophy, Clifford Odets was committed to the future welfare of the individual members of society. The commitment was rather emotional in nature than intellectual. Odets' thus becomes the highest and most comprehensive form of commitment. The touch of youthfulness, or the tone of affirmation, was a characteristic of his thought and expression, which had its imprint even on the technique of his plays. The explanation of Gerald Rabkin for the decline of Odets' fame appears to be the most reasonable. He says it is nothing but the inevitable process of literary history, "Every age destroys the idols of its predecessor. Literary idols are particularly vulnerable, for that quality which allows an artist to speak in the authentic voice of his age will also tie him inexorably to it; and the new generation, retrospectively viewing the furore of his emergence, will wonder what all the fuss was about. Such has been the fate of Clifford Odets, the Golden Boy of Depression drama" (Gerald Rabkin, 1964). Odets' idol, though not totally destroyed, has been under eclipse under altered social and political circumstances in the

U.S.A. He had contributed the true spirit of a positive philosophy when the age was sinking into a deep abyss of de-moralisation. He represents the 'found generation', because of his creative approach even to political and social issues. It is the duty of a conscientious scholar of American Drama to look into the background of the eclipse Odets has suffered, and to spearhead a revival of interest in his works, Clifford Odets, the true, morally committed spokesman of the age of turbulence, deserves a new lease of life.

Douglas McDermott says, "The social drama of the thirties was not an accident but an intention." (Reynolds, 1986). So the plays were created as a result of the theoretical criticism of the time. The writers decided to change the status quo in their depression-torn country. Through their plays, writers like Odets continued to 'demonstrate their theme that society could face and conquer any of its problems if only it would learn to bring individuals together to work in a common cause for a common good.' The revolt of these social playwrights against corruption, oppression, injustice, and family for 'social order' was not a blind one. It was like an inquiry into old and established institutions and ideas; a suggestion of positive alternatives. John Gassner writes, "The theatre of the thirties will be remembered for its playwrights, not because they produced masterpieces for the ages, but because they responded to the challenge of their times vigorously and excitingly. They had the defects of their virtues....But they were faulty and alive instead of perfect and dead or meticulous and tepid." (John Gassner, 1968). Odets plays are rich with clearly defined characters and are brimful with the juices of life. His dialogue pulsates with the beat and whirl of the city. His language is a compound of New York dialects, it can't be said that it is 'dated' because 'no one ever really spoke exactly as Odets' characters do any more than the Elizabethan spoke as Shakespeare wrote.'

The family is of the utmost importance in all of Odets' plays, and most of his plays show it as the basic and most important social institution. Baird Shuman says, "It is perhaps too early to indicate Odets' position in the history of American drama. It seems evident that he is not of the stature of Eugene O' Neill; however, he may well be called the most significant of the specifically proletarian playwrights of the 1930's. His poetic use of language, his accurate capturing and reproduction of the vernacular, as well as his keen understanding of human motivation, have led the way to such modern playwrights as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Truman Capote. It would not seem extravagant to state that the name Clifford Odets is firmly fixed and importantly placed in the drama of twentieth-century America." (Baird Shuman, 1962). Michael J. Mendelsohn in his preface says, "Odets was a humanitarian by inclination and a radical by accident. He happened onto the scene and came to maturity at a moment in American drama when certain audiences and critics demanded messages with their plays and significance with their literature. But Odets was not content to remain in the 'social protest' pigeonhole. He was a skilled craftsman with a style of his own which influenced several other playwrights. More than this, he towered above his protesting contemporaries because of his idealism, his optimism, and his faith in America." (Michael J. Mendelsohn, 1969). Odets was not an ivory tower writer, but he was too deeply committed to people and their problems to create 'art for art's sake'. The world revealed in the plays of Odets' is dynamic and fluid. Michael J. Mendelsohn says, "Undoubtedly Odets' contributions to American dramatic literature are, at least in part, the product of that love and of the sensitivity or social consciousness which compelled him to become a writer in the first place." (Michael J. Mendelsohn, 1969).

Harold Clurman eulogizes Odets, "I prefer many of Odets' faults to many other

playwrights' virtues because even what Odets fails to accomplish is more vital than what the others already have accomplished." (Introduction of *Night Music*, 1940). Clurman insisted, "Odets was the voice of his day. He expressed the curious contradictions of a society that was experiencing the most profound challenge to its values which it had ever experienced outside the Civil War." The optimism is present in the last scene of nearly every Odets play, whatever sordidness precedes it because Odets believed in people and their potentialities. The emotional intensity and narrative urgency are the hallmarks of Odets' plays. All these made Clifford Odets a master and promising proletarian playwright in American Drama.

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